Managing Access To E-Commerce Sites

BY TIM WILSON

IT'S BEEN SAID THAT THE INTERnet is the world's most democratic medium. When you type in a URL, you wait in the same queue for access, whether you're a 12-year-old hacker or the president of General Motors.

A noble idea. But is this any way to do electronic commerce?

In the real world, companies want to offer preferential treatment—or, more politely, "quality of service"—to regular customers and other partners who do large amounts of business with them over the Web. Later this month, they will be able to buy a new product that will let them do just that.

Atreve Software Inc. (www.atreve. com), a Cambridge, Mass.-based start-up that opened its doors in June, is preparing to unveil software that will not only help companies track and balance the load among multiple Web servers, but set up preferential paths for users and groups.

The software, called Webspective 1.0, will be able to "recognize" incoming network addresses and route the traffic according to company-defined policies, according to Atreve executives. In other words, the president of GM gets the fastest, most reliable Web server; the hacker gets whatever's left.

"The quality of service capability will definitely be part of our plans for some of our customers," said Adam Honig, president of C-bridge Internet Solutions (www. c-bridge.com), a Boston-based company that builds Web business applications for Fortune 1000 companies and a Webspective beta test site.

"We have one large mutual fund company that needs to be able to screen people based on the size of their accounts," Honig explained. "The people with a large amount of money will get personalized services. Atreve will help us set that up."

Another firm that handles Web commerce for large corporations agreed. "What Atreve is doing is putting the smarts in the system to be able to filter traffic based on business policy," said Prabakar Sundarrajan, director of Web services at Exodus Communications Inc. (www.exodus.com), Santa Clara, Calif. "That lets you divide up server resources based not only on
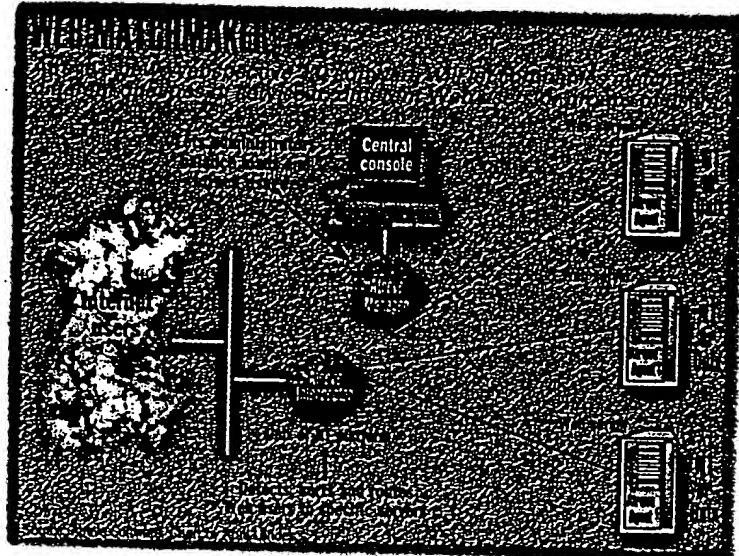
the load, but on the user."

There are many Web management tools available on the market today, but most of them are reporting tools that show how many hits a server received or interpret trends in log files, analysts said.

Play Ball!

"To use a baseball analogy, it's sort of like giving the manager a whole lot of statistics after the game is already over," said Rick Sturm, principal at Enterprise Management Professional Services Inc. (www.eml-summit. com), a Boulder, Colo., consulting firm. "There aren't that many tools that help the manager out during the game."

Webspective provides Web traffic statistics, but it also offers Web server management, load balancing and traffic prioritization. "We're tying together traffic analysis and applications management," said Swapnil Shah, president of Atreve. "We're providing quality of service for Internet applications."

The new software is composed

of three components: Interceptor, which receives Internet traffic and distributes it according to administrator-defined policies; Manager, which monitors Web server load and helps optimize resources; and Webspective agents, which reside on each server and feed information to the Manager.

When a user queries a company's Web application, Interceptor reads the user's network address and determines which server should handle the query, according to Atreve executives. The Manager collects data on how the servers handle the query, and can gather detailed statistics on server

performance as well as how each Web page is used (see diagram).

Because the product is not scheduled to be unveiled for another four weeks, executives could not provide pricing or availability information, other than to say the product is in beta testing. A formal announcement is scheduled for the end of September, they said.

E-Commerce Mgm't

Webspective might be the answer to several key questions that users have about the reliability and manageability of commerce servers.

"Let's say you have five Web servers," said Donna Scott, research director at Gartner Group (www.gartner.com), Stamford, Conn. "When you do load balancing via [Domain Name System, the Internet server addressing standard], you typically would distribute the traffic evenly, 20 percent to each server. But if one server fails, DNS will still try to deliver 20 percent of the traffic to that server, and that causes delays."

A product such as Webspective can do more intelligent load balancing because it can differentiate traffic and keep the high-priority users operating even if there are failures within the server farm, Scott said.

And because users are recognized immediately upon entering the server complex, it will be easier for corporations to track their Web habits and perhaps even tailor the information presented to the user while they are still online, Shah said.

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> *Rick Sturm*

Of course, the new software is not without weak points, experts said. For example, inputting and maintaining the network addresses of end users and user groups will be the responsibility of the network administrator. •